

Preventing Actor Burnout through a Mental Health and Wellness Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the need for a mental health and wellness curriculum for students in actor training programs. Burnout and mental health struggles are a huge concern in the field of professional theatre. It is a uniquely demanding profession, and the strains and stresses that come with a career in theatre often lead to mental health issues, which many performers feel unequipped to address. Theatre creates a means of expression that is unrivaled outside of the arts, but the demands of the profession combined with the vulnerability that theatre-making necessitates can create a difficult environment in which to thrive. This paper proposes a curriculum that allows young actors to do just that, fostering more fruitful careers, with less risk of burnout. The curriculum that is outlined in this paper consists of components such as developing a meditation practice, cultivating and maintaining healthy relationships, physical health for actors, developing mental flexibility, and goal-setting and personal growth. This paper and

curriculum are based on existing research in the field of mental health and the mental health needs of actors, interviews with mental health professionals, actors, and professors of theatre, and the author's experiences as an actor and educator.

As any professional actor can attest, an actor's lifestyle can make it difficult to maintain mental health. Job instability, financial concerns, and rejection and criticism (along with many other factors) contribute to a high-stress lifestyle that can be detrimental to an actor's mental health and lead to burnout. Most actor training programs prepare young actors for the business of being a professional actor by teaching students how to take a good headshot, prepare their resume, get an agent, have a successful audition, and many other aspects of what it takes to "make it" in the business. However, most actor training programs are missing a fundamental part of being a successful actor: how to maintain and nurture mental health. Without this key component, actors are at a high risk for burnout, no matter how talented and otherwise prepared they are. This paper provides a rationale for the importance of mental health and wellness education as part of a collegiate actor training program.

There is an undeniable rate of burnout for professional actors due to the unique challenges of an acting career. One of the most stress-inducing parts of being an actor is the unreliable and often short-term employment and the financial insecurity that goes with it. Getting a paying job as an actor is difficult, and most actors must have a "survival job" that actually pays their bills. Many actors have two or more jobs that they must maintain in order to afford their costs of living. Most are part-time, and it is often a struggle to find a job that can both pay the bills and be flexible enough to allow an actor to go to auditions, rehearsals, and performances. This also means that very few actors (unless they are part of Actors' Equity) are able to get health insurance from their employers, meaning they must go without, or rely on expensive and often sub-par health insurance.

When performers *do* manage to find employment as actors, they are often changing jobs regularly due to the short-term nature of employment (Robb, Due & Venning, 2018, pp. 83-4). If an actor books

a commercial, they may be able to pay their rent for another month, but it most likely won't turn into long-term employment. Many shows do not run for more than a few months, so even if an actor is lucky enough to book a show, they will likely be left unemployed again within a year. There are obvious exceptions to this, such as actors who are cast in long- running Broadway shows or as series regulars in successful TV shows, but most actors aren't that lucky. As a whole, acting gigs are short-lived and unreliable, which can lead to serious financial stress. Even when actors are able to book gigs, the pay is often not enough to live off of, and they must maintain their survival jobs in addition to juggling the schedule of their acting job. Most actors cite financial concerns as a serious source of stress in their lives (Maxwell, Seton, & Szabo, 2015, p. 97).

In addition to job insecurity and financial strain, there is often a feeling of powerlessness that accompanies being an actor. In a study that looked at the mental wellbeing of Australian actors, Robb, Due & Venning (2018) found that many actors reported that "success appeared to be in the hands of a few with power, leading to feelings of helplessness and humiliation" (p. 79). Ultimately, actors have very little control over their success in the field; directors and casting directors have the final say in whether they work. Robb, Due & Venning also found that actors felt that people were cast based on factors outside of work ethic and talent (p. 79). According to one actor interviewed:

You just don't feel in control of anything because you're at the behest of somebody else, you know, what they've programmed, whether there's even a character that you could conceivably play, depending on what's your relationship with that director, have you worked out a rapport, they want to work with you. You feel like a, I don't know, a little seed in the wind or whatever, just being blown here there and everywhere. (p. 79)

This was a common theme among the actors interviewed for this paper. There are many factors that go into casting that an actor has no control over, and it can leave an actor feeling very powerless. This can be frustrating and disheartening, especially for those that don't fit the mold of what a successful actor is "supposed" to look like. An actor and college theatre professor interviewed for this paper also mentioned the

constant state of judgment and rejection that an actor must endure.

I think one of the hardest things for [professional actors] is the constant state of rejection that they're in...you're in a constant state of judgement, rejection, judgement, rejection, judgement, rejection. I feel like actors have the hardest time with this gaze that's always on you – your focus is always on yourself and wondering if you're good enough. I feel like that's what plagues a lot of actors.

This came up among several of the actors interviewed. No matter how successful an actor is, most of the auditions they go on end with rejection. This doesn't mean that they aren't talented, prepared, or good at what they do. It's simply a numbers game. Constant rejection is difficult to deal with, and it's a part of daily life for actors.

Additionally, once an actor is cast, they must navigate working with a new director. Working with a director has the potential to be a powerful and rewarding artistic experience, but that is not always the case. In fact, Maxell, Seton, and Szabo (2015) found that a significant percentage of actors reported being bullied or harassed by people in positions of power (p. 95). An actor and professor interviewed for this project mentioned this phenomenon as well.

I just talked to an actor last night – I went to see a show, and I talked to my friend after the show...and he said “The director was so mean, and particularly to me, the director was *really*, hideously mean to me and it made me question my worth and it made me feel like I was so bad as an actor.” This is at a big, big, respected, fancy-ass theater, right? So, he started to question, am I good at this? That can't be good for your mental health, to have someone be cruel to you in rehearsal and questioning you and questioning your craft and questioning whether you're good at what you do.

As she pointed out, being harassed and mistreated impacts your mental health in a profound way. As an actor, where work is so difficult to come by, it is often difficult to advocate for oneself for fear of being seen as “hard to work with.” The challenges of finding work combined with the sometimes toxic work environments can lead to feelings of

helplessness and a lack of autonomy among actors.

Mental illness among actors is also a large factor that contributes to burnout. The business of acting can be tough, and there tends to be a high rate of mental illness among actors. According to Robb, Due, and Venning (2018), actors experience depression, anxiety, and stress above levels in the general population (p. 78). A high rate of mental illness combined with the stressors of an acting career increases the risk of burnout. In fact, pursuing acting can create problems with burnout that manifest through “exhaustion, inability to switch off, and a sense of personal failure” (Robb, Due & Venning, 2018, p. 81).

A professional actor who has been working in New York City for over a decade commented on the way that mental health has impacted his acting career:

Everything I have done in my career, every choice that I make is affected by my mental health. And it has gone up and down, and it has tanked my career at one point...part of [the difficulties in my career] was just circumstances, and part of it was – I was just trying to tough through the mental health things, as I had been for years, and not addressing it, and now that I’m addressing it...in a more direct way, it’s so much better.

Many actors are resistant to addressing their mental health, as this actor mentioned. In Robb, Due, and Venning’s 2018 study, “Exploring psychological wellbeing in a sample of Australian actors,” participants described unwillingness to disclose their mental health challenges because of feared consequences (p. 78). In a profession that has the motto “the show must go on,” Robb, Due, and Venning also found that there is a high level of pressure to perform even when ill (p. 78). Consequently, many actors have trouble taking the time to take care of their physical health, much less their mental health. Due to the stigma attached to mental illness, it is often difficult for anyone to disclose mental health issues, much less actors who face pressure to feign health and continue to work despite health challenges (Quinn, et al., 2009).

Additionally, alcohol often plays a role in the lifestyle of an actor. According to Robb, Due, and Venning (2018) and Maxwell, Seton, and Szabo (2015), many actors use alcohol as a coping mechanism to deal

with the stresses of the career. Not only is alcohol used as a coping mechanism, but it is also used as a means of socializing and networking. The consumption of alcohol can be extremely detrimental long-term. According to the UK Mental Health Foundation (2006), amongst those in the general population who drink alcohol, higher volume of consumption is associated with more symptoms of depression (p. 23). In fact, alcohol use can lead to a whole host of psychological symptoms like depression and anxiety, as well as exacerbating any symptoms that are already occurring (p. 22). In a population where there is already a high rate of mental illness, the consumption of alcohol can make things worse.

Despite the difficulties of working as a professional actor, many thousands of people still choose to pursue this career. According to Data USA, a company that looks at employment statistics in the United States, 11,184 theatre degrees were awarded in 2016 (Data USA, 2016). Although not all of them went on to pursue acting professionally, that is still a tremendous amount of people passionate enough about acting to spend thousands of dollars studying it. As most professional actors will attest to, a passion for acting cannot be extinguished just because it's a challenging profession. So, the question becomes, how can actor training programs prepare young people to be successful *and* healthy as professional actors?

Developing and maintaining mental health is a vital part of this process. According to Keyes (2005), "Mental health is '... a state of successful performance of mental function, resulting in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with people, and the ability to adapt to change and to cope with adversity'" (p. 540). The ability to adapt to change and cope with adversity is key in being a successful actor. A therapist based in Chicago talked about the hallmarks of an individual who is truly mentally healthy.

Is somebody really living their life? Are they engaged in things that are meaningful to them? Are they engaged in quality relationships? And do they adhere to rigid rules that hold them back from stuff that matters to them, or are they able to pursue what matters to them in a vital way? ... Are you able to accept that pain is part of life, and there is just as much life in a moment of pain as there is in a moment of joy?

For her, flexibility is key. She practices Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT), which is a type of therapy that stresses flexibility, mindfulness, and making space for difficult thoughts and experiences (Harris, 2019; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2009; Gordon, Borushok, & Polk, 2017). ACT will play a large role in this curriculum because the focus in ACT is not on changing one's thoughts, but on learning the mental flexibility, mindfulness, and acceptance that help to navigate negative thoughts and the challenges of daily life. In a career that is fraught with challenges, these tools can be extremely beneficial in maintaining mental health.

As this paper has previously addressed, an actor's life is full of change. They are constantly inhabiting different roles, gaining and losing employment, and being subject to criticism and rejection on a daily basis. Mental health and flexibility are imperative to being able to cope with these aspects of being an actor. Keyes (2005) also wrote that "mental health depends on an individual's ability to mentally cope with, transform, and find meaningful lessons from the stressors and life's challenges" (p. 547). In order to be mentally healthy, actors must be able to accomplish these things and learn lessons from their failures. Some people are naturally better at this than others, but this curriculum is about teaching these all-important skills to young actors.

In terms of mental health, Keyes (2005) focuses on the following criteria to determine whether a person is mentally healthy: self-acceptance, the ability and desire to engage in personal growth, a sense of direction and purpose in life, the ability to mold their environment to fit their needs, an interest in social life, having self-worth that is determined by internal (rather than external) criteria, engaging in satisfying personal relationships, and having a sense of belonging to a community, among others (p. 541). In addition, Keyes (2002) wrote that "[i]ndividuals are functioning well when they like most parts of themselves, have warm and trusting relationships, see themselves developing into better people, have a direction in life, are able to shape their environment to satisfy their needs, and have a degree of self-determination" (pp. 208-9). These are all key components to living healthy, fulfilled lives. Some of these things can't be taught, such as liking most parts of themselves, but this curriculum can give students tools that allow them to build confidence and self-acceptance. In the development of this curriculum, mental health

professionals, actors, and college professors were interviewed to determine how to teach skills like self-acceptance, finding a direction and goal in life, engaging in personal growth, and developing satisfying personal relationships. Through this curriculum, students will learn to develop and maintain lasting, resilient mental health.

According to Farrar (2017), there is a lack of health resources for young actors (p. 28). Currently, there is very little in the way of health resources, especially mental health resources, for actors outside of Farrar's work in the *Teaching Artist Journal*. This is a massive gap in actor training programs, and this curriculum could be implemented to create healthier, more successful actors. Farrar wrote that health curricula for actors should include "healthy eating at minimal expense, body image and eating-disorder awareness, supportive relationships with friends and family, tenable 'day jobs,' budgeting and saving, meditation for mental health, and substance abuse awareness" (p. 29). These themes also came up in the interviews conducted for this curriculum, in addition to things such as developing an exercise routine, fostering hobbies outside of theatre, and developing a meditation and mindfulness practice.

Although there is some scholarship on the connection between mental health and acting, it is largely not focused on developing mental health for the wellbeing of the actor. Some scholars discuss the therapeutic benefits of theatre for participants and audiences alike, which should not be discounted (Schechner, 1973; Torrisen & Stickley, 2019). There is also a significant amount of research on how addressing and developing an actor's mental health and their ability to feel and express the emotion of the character can help them improve their on-stage performance (Kapsali, 2013; Robb & Davies, 2015; Zarrilli, 1995). However, this paper addresses developing the mental health of the actor through alternative means, not to make them a better actor necessarily, but to make them better, healthier people. The work of Barton (1994) has heavily influenced this research, but his focus is largely on creating a safe and supportive environment in the acting classroom and less on developing overall mental health.

This comprehensive mental health and wellness curriculum would be implemented in a collegiate actor training program and would ideally go hand in hand with a business of theatre class in order to prepare young actors for all sides of being "successful." In developing

this curriculum, mental health professionals, professional actors, and college professors working in actor training programs were interviewed to determine what is missing from collegiate actor training programs and how to best teach these topics to young actors. Ideally, students would attend weekly or bi-weekly ACT-based therapy throughout this course.

Many rituals are incorporated from the beginning of the course, such as the same warm- up every class and ending each class with a guided meditation, which can be helpful for students navigating their mental health in a classroom setting (Barton, 1994, p. 112). The first unit of this curriculum focuses on self. It looks at developing self-care, discovering values, mindfulness and meditation, physical health, developing mental flexibility, navigating challenging thoughts and self-judgments, acceptance, and understanding and navigating fear. In this unit, students will develop, implement, and reflect on a self-care plan using the techniques and strategies learned in class. In the second unit of the curriculum, the focus is on developing and maintaining healthy relationships. The lessons focus on love languages, healthy communication, self-advocacy and setting boundaries, vulnerability, and the effects of relationship on self. As the final project for this unit, students will devise a short scene incorporating the aspects of healthy relationships that they have learned in this unit. The third unit focuses on self and art and includes developing confidence, addressing performance anxiety, creating new work, separating from challenging roles and cooling down after performances, and values-based goal setting. As a final project for the course, students will create an original piece in any format that demonstrates their learning for the course.

Within the class, students will be placed into “support groups” of three to four students with whom they will check in on a weekly basis. They will also reflect regularly, both in class and in a weekly journal. Barton (1994), wrote about the benefits of small, supportive groups within the class and regular journaling (pp. 107-108). In an ideal world, it would go hand in hand with professional development for theatre professors to help them design programs that combat the issues that contribute to a lack of mental health in the acting profession while still preparing actors for the real world.

Acting is a difficult profession fraught with issues that contribute to a lack of mental wellness among actors. Mental health is vital to being

a successful, well-rounded human being, and there is a dire need for mental health curricula in actor training programs. This semester-long curriculum addresses mental health among young actors and adequately prepares them for the profession in a way that sets them up for success and avoids burnout. Acting professionally is difficult, but this curriculum can provide students with the skills they need to navigate it in a safe, healthy way.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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